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SUBJECT: ELYSEE CAUTIOUS BUT ENCOURAGED ON MIKATI  
APPOINTMENT AS LEBANESE PM

Classified By: Acting DCM Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) Presidential Advisor on the Middle East Dominique Boche expressed cautious optimism on the appointment of Najib Mikati as Lebanese PM-designate, during a discussion with poloff April 18. On the one hand, Boche conceded that Mikati's background and ties to Syrian President Bashar al-Asad were reasons to remain very cautious. On the other hand, the manner in which Mikati was chosen, with the opposition supporting him and thwarting an all-out Syrian effort to back hard-liner Abdulrahim Mrad, gave reason for hope that a government could be formed quickly and elections could take place on time, or with a very slight delay. On the latter point, Boche reaffirmed that the most the GoF could accept was a technical election delay of a few weeks, though it would not concede this publicly and would continue to insist on respecting the May 31 deadline. (Note: The GoF reiterated calls for Lebanese elections taking place on time in an April 16 statement on the Mikati nomination, text in para 4, and in a joint French-Saudi communique issued upon conclusion of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's visit to Paris April 15. End note.)

2. (C) As a next step, Boche said the GoF wanted to see Mikati move quickly to name a government of independent ministers who could inspire confidence -- which meant giving the opposition a say in choosing ministers, but not likely having opposition ministers in government. The new government would also have to move quickly to resolve the election law issue before the end of April in order to hold elections by May 31. On this point, Boche noted that Druze leader Walid Jumblatt, during Paris meetings with FM Barnier and Elysee officials April 15, had shown flexibility on whether smaller or larger election district were used, in contrast to the Maronite Christian elements of the opposition, who remained attached to the smaller "qada" districts proposal. On the issue of election observers, Boche said President Lahoud had shown openness on accepting international election observers during the EU troika demarche delivered to him this past weekend -- likely a sign of Lahoud's increased isolation and weakness.

3. (C) Asked about the recent "Letter to a French Friend," by Hizballah Secretary-General Nasrallah published in the French daily "Le Figaro" April 15 (which also appeared in the Lebanese daily "Al Safir" April 13), Boche interpreted the letter as a positive sign that Hizballah might be evolving, though Hizballah had yet to come on board in supporting elections on time. MFA DAS-equivalent for the Levant Christian Jouret told us separately that Jumblatt, during his April 15 meeting with Barnier, described the Nasrallah letter as a sign of Hizballah's weakening position in the wake of the Syrian pull-out and an attempt to divide the U.S. and France on Lebanon. According to Jouret, Barnier told Jumblatt that there were no problems between the U.S. and France on Lebanon. (Note: The MFA spokesperson, when asked April 15 about the Nasrallah letter and Hizballah's refusal to disarm, "took note" of the Nasrallah letter "with interest," but also reiterated that "concerning the implementation of UNSCR 1559, Hizballah must enter into the process of complete politicization; it is necessary, naturally, that it be disarmed, as the Ta'if accords and 1559 both demand. It (UNSCR 1559) must be implemented, of course. But things must be done in their time and context and therefore, it is necessary to address this question in a gradual sequential manner." End note.)

4. (U) The following is a text of the MFA statement issued April 16 on Mikati's appointment:

Begin text.

We have taken note of the nomination of Mr. Najib Mikati, MP and former minister, as Prime Minister by the Lebanese President upon conclusion of parliamentary consultations. We hope that Mr. Mikati will be able to form a government very quickly, for which the objective will be, as he (Mikati) himself already declared, the organization within the institutional deadlines of legislative elections which must allow the Lebanese people to freely express themselves. The first task of this government will therefore be to launch the electoral process but also to participate in the establishment on the ground of the international commission of inquiry on the attack against Rafik Hariri, created by UNSCR 1595.

End text.  
WOLFF